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ABSTRACT

Parents, teachers, and government officials agree that America's schools must be reformed. However, new research suggests that most reforms will not work without closer attention to one critical resource--time. This document presents findings of a study conducted by the Rand Institute on Education and Training, which found that any reform takes time to formulate, plan, implement, and institutionalize. Because teachers must give first priority to classroom teaching, they must accommodate the new demands of reform into their already tight schedules. Reform conducted on the fringes of the school day, however, will never amount to fundamental change. Four principles for creating the time that staff members need are offered: (1) readjust priorities by removing old demands and resisting other reforms that divert time and attention; (2) provide time and resources for teachers; (3) recognize change as a long-term process requiring patience; and (4) create shared time for groups to work together. Drawing on these four principles, specific implications for the roles of the following groups are identified: state education agencies and legislatures should apply a realistic time frame; teachers' unions should advocate a wider range of job descriptions for teachers; foundations and business partners should extend their support over a number of years; school boards should make staff planning time a routine part of the school calendar; school administrators should institutionalize common planning time and provide staff; and teachers and other staff should abandon some existing commitments, and use time slots appropriate to the purpose. (LMI)

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Time for Reform

Parents, teachers, and government officials agree that America's schools must be reformed. In many places, the process has already begun. But new research suggests that most reforms won't work without closer attention to one critical resource: time.

On the margins

The study's authors, Susanna Purnell and Paul Hill of RAND's Institute on Education and Training, point out that any reform—redefining missions, changing governance structures, introducing new curricula, promoting specific teaching methods, or reshaping school culture—takes time to formulate, plan, implement, and become routine. Teachers, in particular, must spend time not only taking workshops and courses, but researching, negotiating, observing, practicing, evaluating, sharing progress, and making adjustments.

But unlike factories that shut down to retool or stores that close to remodel, schools must continue to operate while attempting to reform. Thus, most give first priority to time for classroom teaching. No matter how pressing the need for reform, then, the time to accomplish that reform is usually drawn from the fringes of the day or borrowed from other activities. Even when teachers receive dedicated time for reform, they must often perform extra work as well, such as training volunteers or preparing lesson plans for a substitute. These requirements add to the teacher's already demanding schedule—and send a clear signal that reform is not truly the highest priority.

The researchers conclude that reforms conducted on the fringes of the school day can never amount to a fundamental change. They identify a number of specific ways that schools can create the time staff members need. They also outline four key principles behind those efforts.

Just say no

The first principle is to create time by readjusting priorities. Supporting change means removing old demands and resisting other reforms that divert time and attention. Many schools, however, have trouble saying no. State and federal mandates can make this especially difficult. As one principal complained, the state education department "continued to crank out new curriculum guides—never a recommendation as to what to remove from the present curriculum to allow time to teach new material. One cannot continue to add to an already bloated curriculum without something spilling out." At the district level, a number of programs may be required by officials who don't consult each other; often, no one in the system monitors the accumulating burden. The overwhelming and contradictory requirements that result can appear capricious, discouraging teachers from supporting *any* new effort.

No free lunch

Second, reform requires adequate investment. Schools must find resources to enable teachers to identify, design, and begin implementing change while the school continues to function. Failing to provide these resources can doom a program. Funding buys time by providing money for substitute teachers, retreats, and summer institutes or planning sessions. It also signals to teachers that administrators are serious about reform. This encourages teachers to invest some of their own unpaid time—an indispensable resource for reform. The cost of providing time for reform varies, but appears to be small (on the order of 1 or 2 percent of the cost of operating a school).

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Patience, patience

Third, change requires time for the entire process, not just a single event. Corporations have learned that any substantial reform, decentralizing for example, requires people to develop new skills. The same is true in schools; teachers who have spent years working alone in their classrooms may suddenly be asked to collaborate or act as peer leaders, facilitators, and coaches. Such skills can't be learned overnight; indeed, truly reforming a school can take years. Yet administrators too often spend considerable resources hiring outside trainers and paying teachers to attend a course, but balk at providing the less costly but crucial time that teachers need to follow up, practice, and make new practice routine. Those who plan and fund reform must be willing to persist and to provide time throughout the process.

In the details

The fourth principle is this: once a school has made the strategic commitment to provide enough total time, tactics—allocating specific time slots—become critical. The problem is creating time not just for individual teachers, but for groups to work on change together. This is a key element of many current reforms, which aim to strengthen the school as a whole. Creating such shared time poses a real challenge, since the typical school's master schedule can free up only a few teachers at once. But if there is real commitment to reform, the process of enacting that reform should become central to the school calendar. (The study's final report includes an inventory of numerous approaches that schools have been using to create time slots. Though most of them are now used mainly during the fringes of the school day, many could be useful—indeed, even more effective—in a reform effort that recognized time's critical role.)

Group dynamics

Drawing on these four principles, the researchers identify specific implications for a number of different groups in the reform process:

State education agencies and legislatures should apply a realistic time frame, provide funding for the reform process, and minimize competing requirements.

Teachers' unions should advocate a wider range of job descriptions for teachers and actively facilitate waivers when descriptions or contract provisions needlessly block reform, for example by strictly limiting the number of meetings or staff development sessions a teacher can attend.

Foundations and business partners should extend their support over a number of years, help schools seek regulation waivers, and avoid overloading a school with competing reform activities.

School boards should make staff planning time and professional development days a routine part of the school calendar, coordinate reforms and requirements to prevent overload, set realistic milestones, fund efforts to sustain programs as well as create them, and explore more-varied teacher job descriptions.

School administrators should institutionalize common planning time and other opportunities, provide staff with follow-up time to sustain reform, and enlist support from outside the system.

Teachers and other staff should abandon some existing commitments, promote more opportunities to meet or work together during the day, and use time slots appropriate to the purpose.

This Policy Brief highlights major policy-relevant findings of research conducted by RAND. The study, supported by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, is documented in Time for Reform, *R-4234-EMC, by Susanna Purnell and Paul Hill. To order a copy, please contact RAND Distribution Services, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138, telephone (310) 393-0411. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve public policy through research and analysis.*

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